scCancerExplorer: a comprehensive database for interactively exploring single-cell multi-omics data of human pan-cancer

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Abstract

Single-cell multi-omics data is a valuable resource to promote the understanding of cancer. However, multimodal data analysis is challenging for most cancer researchers, and there is still a lack of online databases that can bridge the gap. Here we introduced scCancerExplorer, which is a user-friendly database designed for exploring single-cell multi-omics data of human pan-cancer. We processed more than 110 datasets covering single-cell multiomics data from 51 human cancer types, and provides 5 major modules and 12 useful functions for conveniently exploring those data. (1) The "Integrated multi-omics analysis" module enables users explore a gene from multimodal perspectives, such as the gene expression levels, survival analysis, transcription factor activity, and the DNA methylation levels of promoter regions. (2) With single-cell transcriptome module, users can explore the integrated pan-cancer datasets, compare the expression profiles between primary tumor and metastases, and generate customized figures. (3) With single-cell epigenome module, users can explore promoter DNA methylation levels in both normal and cancer cells, DNA methylation state at single CpG resolution, and chromatin accessibility patterns of different cell types. (4) For single-cell genome data, users can visualize the copy number variations of cancer cells for each patient. (5) Moreover, TCGA survival analysis can be performed conveniently. Users can not only group the patients according to gene expression levels, but also select patients by gene mutation states, pathological subtypes, and cancer stages. In summary, scCancerExplorer is a powerful database for convenient data mining by simple clicking, and gaining novel insights into human pan-cancer. scCancerExplorer is freely accessible at https://bianlab.cn/scCancerExplorer.

Key words: Database; human pan-cancer; single-cell multi-omics

Introduction

Cancer is a leading cause of mortality globally(1), which is characterized by heterogeneous genetic, epigenetic, and transcriptional landscapes. Over recent years, single-cell multi-omics techniques have revolutionized cancer research, offering powerful tools to dissect tumor heterogeneity and understand the intricate molecular basis of human cancers. Moreover, large amounts of single-cell multi-omics data, encompassing the genome, transcriptome, and epigenome, have been consistently generated for human cancer studies (2–38). Importantly, these studies not only provided a comprehensive atlas of human cancers, but also offered a wealth of data resources for further exploration. However, analyzing and integrating the massive single-cell multi-omics data from separate studies posed significant challenges, particularly for wet-lab researchers lacking analytical skills and adequate computing resources. Therefore, there is an urgent need for comprehensive and user-friendly platforms to bridge the gap between abundant data resources and wet-lab researchers.

Recently, growing numbers of databases related to cancer have been developed to facilitate cancer researchers. The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) provided comprehensive multi-omics data and clinical information of 33 human cancer types, providing valuable resources for exploring human cancer. Furthermore, several single-cell transcriptomic databases of human cancers have emerged and provided comprehensive gene expression atlases of both the cancers and the tumor microenvironment (TME), such as CancerSEA (39), TISCH (40), and CancerSCEM (41). However, despite these advancements, integrated multi-omics analysis stands at the forefront as a rapidly growing trend, showing its pivotal role in unravelling the complexities of cancer biology and facilitating personalized therapeutic strategies. Currently, there still remains an absence of a user-friendly and integrated web tool designed for exploring single-cell multi-omics data of human pan-cancer.

Here, we introduce scCancerExplorer, an integrated database designed to provide user-

friendly functions for exploring single-cell multi-omics data of human pan-cancer. By facilitating data mining and inspiring novel insights into pan-cancer multi-omics data, scCancerExplorer aims to empower researchers to decipher the complexities of human cancer and pave the way for cancer research.

Database content and usage

Overall design

scCancerExplorer was designed to enable convenient exploration of single-cell multi-omics data of human pan-cancer, and inspired new insights into the complex landscape of human cancers. In total, multi-omics data from more than 110 datasets covering over 4 million single cells has been collected and analyzed. We provided five major modules for users, including "Integrated multi-omics analysis", "Single-cell transcriptome", "Single-cell epigenome", "Single-cell genome" and "TCGA analysis" (Figure 1). Twelve useful functions were provided, which will be described in detail below.

"Integrated multi-omics analysis" module

This module provided a multi-omics perspective to learn an interested gene quickly, including the gene expression levels of both normal and cancer tissues using TCGA data (Figure 2A), the single-cell gene expression levels of various cell types using single-cell RNA-seq data (Figure 2B), survival analysis results using TCGA data (Figure 2C), the transcription factor (TF) activity and gene activity deduced from single-cell ATAC-seq data (Figure 2D, E), and single-cell DNA methylation levels of the promoter region in both normal and cancer cells (Figure 2F). If users want to further learn the interested gene in depth, they can use other modules for each omics below.

"Single-cell transcriptome" module

Pan-cancer analysis

Users can perform quick exploration of the gene expression pattern of pan-cancer by exploring the integrated single-cell RNA-seq data of 49 human cancer types (Figure

3A). Querying the gene expression levels of multiple interested genes in multiple cell types from multiple cancer types at the same time is allowed. Additionally, users can upload their data and integrate it with the pan-cancer data in our database for personalized comparisons (Figure 3B).

Query gene expression

In addition to the above-mentioned "Pan-cancer analysis" function, users typically need explore a certain cancer type in depth, which can be met by the "Query gene expression" function. With this function, users can easily explore the gene expression patterns of an interested gene across different cell types in certain cancer type (Figure 3C), and get other related information at the same time, including the cell type identification, sample locations (e.g. normal tissue, primary tumor, and metastasis), cancer stages, fractions of each cell cluster, sex information, cell cycle phases, and the differentially expressed genes (DEGs) of each cell type (Figure 3D). Moreover, a brief introduction and links to further information for each human gene are presented.

DIY expression plot

The "DIY expression plot" function enables users to query the expression levels of multiple selected genes in multiple selected cell types and generate customized figures to visualize (Figure 4A). Multiple figure types are provided, including dot plots, heatmaps, and violin plots, which can meet most of the needs of users. Moreover, for each cell type, users can easily compare the expression levels among different sampling locations (e.g. primary tumor v.s. metastasis) (Figure 4B), different cancer stages (e.g. stage I v.s. stage III) (Figure 4C), various cancer subtypes (e.g. poorly-differentiated adenocarcinoma v.s. well-differentiated adenocarcinoma) (Figure 4D), and between male and female by simply switching options in the "Group by" select box.

Single-cell epigenome module
Focal DNA methylation plot

With this function, users can select a narrow genomic region of interest (e.g. promoters)

for visualizing the DNA methylation levels at a single CpG resolution. For example,

the "Tanghulu" plot displayed the demethylated region in cancer cells compared with

normal cells (Figure 5A). Each row in the plot represents an individual cell, with each

circle denoting a CpG site. The methylated sites are represented by black circles, while

the unmethylated sites are represented by white circles.

Promoter DNA methylation plot

Users can query the DNA methylation levels of gene promoter regions at single-cell

resolution, and compare them across normal tissues, primary tumors and metastases in

this module (Figure 5B).

Epigenome browser

scCancerExplorer incorporates the WashU Epigenome browser (42) to facilitate the

exploration of chromatin accessibility and co-accessibility patterns. Users can

conveniently access specific genomic regions or genes of interest by inputting the

official gene symbol or a genomic range in the search box at the top left of the browser

interface. For example, we can see five potential enhancers for *LAPMT4B* in ovarian

cancer cells showed higher accessibility levels compared to other cell types (Figure 5C).

The browser interface allows users to zoom in/out, navigate to new regions, and

customize display options such as display mode (bar plot or heatmap), RGB colors, axis

scales, and text labels to suit individual preferences.

TF motif activity

In this module, users can search for an interested transcription factor and obtain the

motif activity score (motif deviation z-score) across different cell types calculated using

single-cell ATAC-seq data (Figure 5D).

DIY ATAC-seq plot

Similar to the "DIY expression plot" module, this module enables users to easily query

the motif activities of multiple TFs across different cell types and generate customized

figures based on their requirements (Figure 5E).

"Single-cell genome" module

This module allows users to investigate the single-cell copy number alterations (CNAs)

of human cancers (Figure 6A-B). For example, users can select a cancer type (e.g.

stomach adenocarcinoma) and select one or multiple patients (e.g. SC02 and SC07),

and then generate the CNA heatmap (Figure 6A). The cancer cells are sorted by genetic

lineage if the lineage information is available.

"TCGA analysis" module

Survival analysis

This module provides survival analysis for 33 cancer types using TCGA data. Notably,

users can categorize patients based on multiple information, including gene expression

levels (e.g. above median v.s. below median), gene mutation states (with TP53 mutation

v.s. without TP53 mutation), pathological types (all types or certain subtype), and

cancer stages (all stages or certain stage). For example, users can group patients by the

expression levels of *TPM2* in all COAD (Colon adenocarcinoma) patients (Figure 7A),

only in patients with *APC* mutation (Figure 7B), and only in patients diagnosed as

adenocarcinoma (Figure 7C), respectively.

ATAC-seq browser

With the "ATAC-seq browser" function, users can explore the open chromatin regions

of 23 cancer types using TCGA ATAC-seq data. They can visualize the chromatin

accessibility pattern of a gene of interest. For example, the chromatin accessibility

pattern of *MISP* and *SRI*, which are highly expressed in gastric cancer (16), can be

explored with this function (Figure 7D-E). Additionally, users can upload their own

data for comparison.

GWAS risk SNPs

Users can quickly search the cancer-associated risk SNPs provided by GWAS catalog (https://www.ebi.ac.uk/gwas/) in this module. Moreover, users can explore the epigenetic states around the risk SNPs in the "Epigenome browser" and "Focal DNA methylation plot" functions, which can inspire novel insights.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data collection

The single-cell transcriptome, epigenome (DNA methylation and chromatin accessibility), and genome data (copy number variation) of 51 human cancer types were collected, curated, and analyzed. Related metadata information, such as pathological subtype, sex, sample location, and clinical stage, was collected if available. The TCGA data from 33 cancer types, including the gene expression matrix, mutation information, and clinical data were obtained from the Genomic Data Commons (GDC) Data Portal (https://portal.gdc.cancer.gov). The ATAC-seq data for 23 cancer types from TCGA project was obtained from https://gdc.cancer.gov/about-data/publications/ATACseq-AWG.

Data processing

Single-cell transcriptome data processing

In principle, the cell type identity information provided by the original studies will be preferentially used. For those datasets without provided cell type identities, first, quality control of the single-cell data was performed according to the description in the original study. Then, the single-cell gene expression matrices were processed utilizing Seurat (v.4.3.0.1) (43). Briefly, for each cell, the unique molecular identifier (UMI) count of each gene was divided by the total UMI counts of the cell and multiplied by a scale factor (default or as the original study described) before natural-

log transformed. The top highly variable genes (default or as the original study

described) were selected using the "FindVariableFeatures" function. The normalized

data were then centered and scaled using the "ScaleData" function. Principal

component analysis (PCA) was conducted on the scaled data using the highly variable

genes. Subsequently, the Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection (UMAP)

was performed and employed to visualize the cell clustering result. Cell types were

annotated based on available metadata or identified using canonical marker genes.

Significant differentially expressed gene (DEG) between various cell types were

identified using the "FindAllMarkers" function in Seurat.

Single-cell DNA methylation data processing

For each cell, only the CpG or WCG sites with DNA methylation levels < 0.1 or > 0.9

were retained. Subsequently, the single-cell data were merged by cell group. For the

CpG or WCG sites covered by multiple cells, the mean DNA methylation levels of

covered cells were calculated (44). The gene promoter regions were defined as 1 kb

upstream and 0.5 kb downstream of the transcription start site (TSS). For each cell, the

mean methylation levels within the promoter regions were calculated to represent the

methylation status of promoter regions.

Single-cell ATAC-seq data processing

To maintain maximum consistency with the original study results, only the cells present

in the metadata information provided by the original study were retained. For datasets

lacking metadata information, low-quality cells were removed mainly based on the

criteria described in the original study. For datasets that did not provide quality control

criteria in the original study, only cells with minTSS > 4 and minFrags > 1000 were

used for further analyses. Downstream data processing utilized the R package ArchR

(v.1.0.2) (45). In general, the "Arrow" file was created according to the quality control

standard and the "addDoubletScores" function of ArchR was employed to remove the

data with doublet enrichment scores > 1. The resulting "Arrow" files were used to create

the "ArchRProject". The iterative latent semantic index (LSI) dimension reduction was performed using the "addIterativeLSI" function in ArchR. Four iterations were executed with a clustering resolution ranging from 0.2 to 1, utilizing 15,000 to 25,000 variable features. Subsequently, the data was compressed into a two-dimensional UMAP embedding using the "addUMAP" function from ArchR package. The enrichment of TF motifs for peaks in each cell cluster was calculated using chromVAR (v.1.20.2). Peak calling was performed on single-cell ATAC-seq data using MACS2 (v.2.2.9.1). The "getGroupBW" function from ArchR package was utilized to export bigwig files with a tile size of 100 bp based on cell type. Peak-to-peak co-accessibility were exported using the "getCoAccessibility" function and then converted to the inter.bb format using bedTOBigBed (46).

Copy number variation data processing

The single-cell copy number variation data were provided by the authors from the original studies (16,30,31).

TCGA survival analysis

The gene expression matrix, mutation information, and clinical data for 33 cancer types were obtained from TCGA project. The "lifelines" library (v.0.27.8) in Python were utilized for the survival analysis. The expression levels were categorized into "High" and "Low" groups based on the median expression value of the selected gene. The Kaplan-Meier survival curves were generated using "KaplanMeierFitter" class, and the log-rank tests were performed. Additionally, a Cox proportional hazards model was fitted using "CoxPHFitter" class to estimate the hazard ratios. The survival curves and statistical results were visualized with matplotlib (v.3.7.5) and seaborn (v.0.13.2).

TCGA RNA-seq data analysis

For TCGA RNA-seq data, the TCGAbiolinks (v2.31.3) package were utilized to extract and clean the data. Specifically, TPM (Transcripts Per Million) matrices were extracted

using the SummarizedExperiment (v1.26.1) package. Subsequently, a log2

transformation was applied to the combined data matrix using the formula $\log_2(TPM +$

$1)$.

ATAC-seq browser

The ATAC-seq peak files of 23 cancer types were downloaded from the TCGA project

(47).

GWAS risk SNPs

The risk SNPs associated with each cancer type were downloaded from the Genome-

Wide Association Study (GWAS) catalog (48).

Discussion

In recent years, single-cell multi-omics sequencing technique has greatly advanced

cancer research, offering comprehensive insights into human pan-cancers. The

interplay between different molecular layers is critical for cancer progression and

metastasis. However, a well-curated and user-friendly platform for exploring single-cell

multi-omics data is still lacking. In this context, we present scCancerExplorer as a

comprehensive single-cell multi-omics database designed for wet-lab researchers and

cancer biologists.

scCancerExplorer was designed to have two important features. First, by preprocessing

a large number of single-cell multi-omics data and providing rich interactive tools to

exploring them, we provide an important bridge between the valuable but complex

resources and cancer researchers. The 5 major modules and 12 useful functions cover

analyses of both single-cell genome, epigenome (chromatin accessibility and DNA

methylation) and transcriptome data, and TCGA data. Second, several customizable

functions were provided to meet personalized requirements of users. For example, with

the "DIY expression plot" function, users can select multiple genes and cell types and

designate their order shown in the generated figures, and use the publishing-level figures in their study. Additionally, by simply switching options in the "Group by" select box, users can easily compare the expression levels among different sampling locations (e.g. primary tumor v.s. metastasis), different cancer stages, and various cancer subtypes. For TCGA survival analysis, users can not only group the patients according to gene expression levels, but also select patients by gene mutation states, pathological subtypes, and cancer stages.

In summary, scCancerExplorer is a powerful database for convenient data mining by simple clicking, and gaining novel insights into human pan-cancer. We aim to continually develop and maintain of the database for the benefits of broad cancer biologists and wet-lab researchers.

Data availability

scCancerExplorer is freely accessible at https://bianlab.cn/scCancerExplorer.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Figure 1. A schematic illustrating the data curation, web construction, and functional modules of scCancerExplorer.

Figure 2. An example for exploring an interested gene (*MISP*) with the "Integrated multi-omics analysis" module.

(A) The gene expression levels of *MISP* in normal tissues and cancer tissues in TCGA STAD dataset.

(B) The relative expression levels of *MISP* across various cell types of STAD with single-cell RNA-seq dataset (GSE210347).

(C) TCGA survival analysis shows that the patients with lower MISP expression levels (<median value) have significantly poorer prognosis.

(D) The motif activities of potential transcript factors for *MISP* deduced from single-cell ATAC-seq data (GSE173682).

(E) The gene activity of *MISP* across different cell types deduced from single-cell ATAC-seq data (GSE173682).

(F) The single-cell DNA methylation levels of *MISP* promoter among normal epithelial cells, cancer cells from primary tumors, and cancer cells from metastasis, which were calculated with single-cell whole-genome DNA methylation sequencing data (HRA001689).

TCGA, The Cancer Genome Atlas; STAD, stomach adenocarcinoma.

Figure 3. Examples for using the "Pan-cancer analysis" and "Query gene expression" functions within "Single-cell transcriptome" module.

(A) The dot plot shows the expression levels and expressed percentages of selected genes in cancer cells of primary tumors from multiple cancer types.

(B) The dot plot shows the expression patterns of selected gene in both the single-cell pan-cancer data in our database and the data uploaded by users.

(C) Querying the relative expression levels of *EPCAM* across various cell types with "Query gene expression" function in colorectal cancer dataset HRA000201

(D) Other related information, such as cell type identities, sampling locations, cancer stages, cell numbers and fractions of each cell type, expression levels of cell cycle genes, tables for differentially expressed genes, were also provided in the "Query gene expression" function.

UMAP, Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection; NSCLC, non-small cell lung cancer; CHOL, cholangiocarcinoma; STAD, stomach adenocarcinoma; PAAD, pancreatic adenocarcinoma; KICH, kidney chromophobe.

Figure 4. Examples for using the "DIY expression plot" function within "Single-cell transcriptome" module.

(A) With the "DIY expression plot" function, the relative expression levels of multiple selected genes among multiple cell groups can be shown in multiple figure types, including dot plot (top), violin plot (middle), and heatmap (bottom).

(B-D) By switching options in the "Group by" select box, the expression levels among different sampling locations (e.g. primary tumor v.s. metastasis) (B), different cancer stages (e.g. stage I v.s. stage III) (C), and various cancer subtypes (e.g. poorly-differentiated adenocarcinoma v.s. well-differentiated adenocarcinoma) (D) can be plotted.

COAD, colon adenocarcinoma; READ, rectal adenocarcinoma.

Figure 5. Examples for using "Single-cell epigenome" module.

(A) The "Tanghulu" plot displays DNA demethylation regions in colorectal cancer cells (dataset ID: GSE97693), with each circle representing a CpG site. White dots represent unmethylated sites, while black dots represent methylated sites. Gray dots at the bottom indicate covered CpG sites within selected regions in selected cells.

(B) The DNA methylation levels of *CALHM3* promoter for normal epithelial cells, cancer cells from primary tumors, and cancer cells from metastasis from gastric cancer patients (dataset ID: HRA001689).

(C) Screenshot of the epigenome browser showing the chromatin accessibility levels

around the transcription start site of *LAPTM4B* across multiple cell types (dataset ID: GSE173682). The gray regions illustrate the potential enhancers regulating *LAPTM4B* in cancer cells.

(D) Querying the motif activity of transcription factor LEF1 across various cell types in kidney renal clear cell carcinoma (dataset ID: GSE181062) with the "TF motif activity" function.

(E) Querying the motif activity of multiple transcription factor (TBX5, RREB1, and LEF1) in multiple cell types (dysfunctional CD8+ T cells, CD8+ effector T cells, and naive CD4+ T cells) in kidney renal clear cell carcinoma (dataset ID: GSE181062) with "DIY ATAC-seq plot" function.

Figure 6. Examples for using "Single-cell genome" module.

(A) and (B). The heatmaps showing the copy number variations of STAD patients (dataset HRA001689) (A) and COAD & READ patients (dataset GSE97693) (B).

STAD, stomach adenocarcinoma; COAD, colon adenocarcinoma; READ, rectal adenocarcinoma.

Figure 7. Examples for using the "Survival analysis" and "ATAC-seq browser" functions within "TCGA analysis" module.

(A) Survival analysis of all COAD patients according to *TPM2* expression levels.

(B) and (C). Only the COAD patients with *APC* mutation (B) or diagnosed as adenocarcinoma (C) were selected to perform survival analysis according to *TPM2* expression levels.

(D) and (E). Browsing the chromatin accessibility pattern of *MISP* (D) *and SRI* (E) in TCGA STAD ATAT-seq data with the "ATAC-seq browser" function.

TCGA, The Cancer Genome Atlas; ATAC, assay for transposase-accessible chromatin; COAD, colon adenocarcinoma; STAD, stomach adenocarcinoma.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Copy number variation

A ● STAD - Stomach adenocarcinoma

Lineage

A B C

Copy number variation

Deletion — Amplification

B ● COAD & READ - Colorectal adenocarcinoma

Lineage

A0 A1 A2 A3 A4 B1 B2 B3 NC

Copy number variation

Deletion — Amplification

Figure 7

Survival analysis - *TPM2*

A All patients

High (n=244)
Low (n=243)
Logrank p: 0.0023
HR (high): 1.81

B Patients with *APC* mutation

High (n=162)
Low (n=162)
Logrank p: 0.0036
HR (high): 1.93

C Adenocarcinoma cases

High (n=202)
Low (n=201)
Logrank p: 0.0212
HR (high): 1.67

ATAC-seq browser

D Chromatin accessibility - *MISP*

Tools: chr19:702050-789997 ◄ +5 +1 +⅓ −⅓ −1 −5 ►

Viewing a 87.9 Kb region in 880px, 1 pixel spans 100 bp Metadata »

refGene PALM PALM MISP MISP

Ruler p13.3
chr19 710K 720K 730K 740K 750K 760K 770K 780K

STAD 2.0 0.0

E Chromatin accessibility - *SRI*

Tools: chr7:88187903-88247293 ◄ +5 +1 +⅓ −⅓ −1 −5 ►

Viewing a 59.4 Kb region in 880px, 1 pixel spans 67 bp Metadata »

refGene SRI SRI ADAM22 LOC102723885 ADAM22 ADAM22 ADAM22 ADAM22 ADAM22 ADAM22 ADAM22 SRI SRI

Ruler q21.12
chr7 88190K 88200K 88210K 88220K 88230K 88240K

STAD 2.0 0.0